

5. THE "PUTSCH" OF 8-9 NOVEMBER 1923

Note

The accounts of the abortive revolution in Munich of November 1923 are very numerous: it will suffice to refer to the account of Joseph Berchtold (who took part in it) as given in H. A. Heinz, *Germany's Hitler*, London, Hurst & Blackett, 1934, ch. 9; to General Ludendorff, *If dem Wed our Feldherrnhalle. Lebenserinnerungen an die Zeit des 9. II. 1923 mit Dokumenten in 5 Anlagen*, Munich, Ludendorffs Verlag, 1937; to Roehm's Memoirs of which the only text accessible to me is *Die Memoiren des Stabschef Röhm*, Saarbrücken, Uranus Verlag [1934]; to Konrad Heiden, *Hitler*, London, Constable, 1936, pp. 139-73 (German original: *Adolf Hitler, i*, Zürich, Europa Verlag, 1936, pp. 140-79); Rudolf Olden, *Hitler the Pawn*, London, Gollancz, 1936, pp. 115-42 (German original: *Hitler*, Amsterdam, Querido Verlag, 1935, pp. 95-119.) There is an interesting pamphlet (lent to me by Dr. Olden): *Veni Vidi, Ludendorff in Bayern oder der Novemberputsch*, Dillingen-Donau, Vedula Verlag, 1924 (written in December 1923).

Documents: Mobilization order to SA., the *Reichsflagge*, and *Oberland* forming the *Kampfbund*. Proclamation of the Revolutionary Bavarian Government; Proclamation of von Kahr that his participation had been extorted from him at the point of the pistol. Order for dissolution of NSDAP. Richtlinien for the Völkisch-Sozialer Block 1924 (= disguised NSDAP.), etc., reproduced in *Wille und Macht* 5 (1937): Heft 17.

The annual celebration of the unsuccessful "Putsch" of 8-9 November 1923 has become the great day of the commemoration of the Martyrs of the National Socialist Movement. Hitler regularly each year has addressed the Old Guard in the Hall of the Bürgerbräu: these speeches generally have followed a single pattern, though those of 1937 and 1938 were largely devoted to a review of foreign policy. I have compared the speeches of the years 1933 to 1938 and have sought to translate from them the passages of special interest.

Hitler, in his speech at Munich on 9 November 1933, at the unveiling of the Memorial to those killed in the "Putsch" of 1923 said: "Since the Revolution of November 1918 had broken the laws which were formerly in force, it could not be expected of us that we should regard the Revolution as a legal constitution.... So in November 1923 we marched, filled with the faith that we should succeed in overthrowing those who were responsible for November 1918, in annihilating the men who were responsible for the untold misfortune of our people. But then Fate decided otherwise; today, after ten years, we can consider that time dispassionately. We know that we all stood under this command of Fate, that we were assuredly but the instruments of a Higher Power. It was not right that it should succeed: the time was not yet ripe. That which then pained us most was the division which arose between those forces in whose ranks we, too, once had stood and the forces which the nation needed for its liberation.... Ten years have passed, and for me today my greatest happiness lies in the fact that the hope of those days is fulfilled and that we now stand side by side — the representatives of our army and the representatives of our people, that we have become one and that this unity in Germany will never break in pieces"....

"Could our dead of the 9th of November rise again they would weep for joy that now the German army and the awakened German people have found their way to unity.... Because today we are binding into one the whole strength of the nation we can now give to the dead their eternal rest.

Or as he expressed it in another speech at the same anniversary celebration:

"We never thought to carry through a revolt against the army (Wehrmacht) of our people: it was with it that we believed we should succeed."

In his speech at the Anniversary Celebration of the year 1934 Hitler said:

"The meaning of 8 and 9 November 1923 lies for us in the fact that then this Movement proved its internal hardness, its power of resistance.... How came it that we survived this catastrophe? The Movement at that time fulfilled an historic command, and to those folk of today who always know better than other people we have one thing only to say: All of you have failed to read your Clausewitz, or if you have read him you have not understood how to apply him to the present time. Clausewitz writes that even after an heroic collapse a reconstruction is always

possible. Only cowards give themselves up, and that cowardice works on and spreads like a drop of poison stealing through the body. And thus one comes to recognize that it is always better if necessary to accept an end with dread than to suffer a dread which has no end"....

"Believe me, the decisive question is, firstly, whether one must fight an opponent, and, secondly, whether one can bear to remain even if one is not victorious. One can always bear victories: the question is only how one bears defeats. When distress, when catastrophes come, then, and only then, can one tell whether there are real men at the head. That was then the decisive question for us. Then we had to fight." We wanted as a party to overthrow the November criminals and to build up a new State, but not on a parliamentary foundation.

This meant that we must have the best material in our followers: "one cannot make any such attempt with cowards."

"But the best men are won only when they know without a doubt that the battle will be fought for life or death. And one could not merely talk for ever: one day one must act. For in the last resort it is only action that compels men to come beneath its spell." The danger was that others should act first: men were saying, "North Germany is Bolshevist anyhow: we must therefore separate from the North. We must leave the North to burn itself out. Only after that can we join up with the North again. They knew quite well how to cut themselves off from the North, but they troubled themselves very little to consider how they should come together again. And for that reason we were determined to act first. We did not want at that time a *coup d'état*; but on one point my mind was made up: if the other side went so far that I knew they would strike, then I would let fly four days before. If anyone says to me, 'Yes, but the consequences!' then I answer, 'The consequences could not be worse than they would have been if we had not acted.' "

"After our rising there were people who said: 'Well, now the National Socialist bomb has exploded!' Yes, yes, but this bomb was filled with seeds which were then thrown out and spread over the whole of Germany. The really important thing was that we saved the idea. It is not decisive whether one conquers: what is necessary is that one must with heroism and courage make oneself responsible for the consequences. And after the fight we did make ourselves responsible for the consequences."

"When the Kapp 'Putsch' was at an end and those who were responsible for it were brought before the Republican courts, then each held up his hands and swore that he knew nothing, had intended nothing, wished nothing. That was what destroyed the *bourgeois* world — that they had not the courage to stand by their act, that they had not the courage to step before the judge and say: Yes, that was what we wanted to do: we wanted to destroy this State, we wanted to drive these men away because we wanted to liberate Germany. *This* courage they lacked and therefore they have suffered shipwreck."

Hitler drew the contrast presented by the National Socialists: our courage at that time "saved the idea and the Movement. This will and this faith remained the same even when we sat within prison walls. I can tell my opponents that those thirteen months did them great damage: those thirteen months gave me time for consideration. What they have experienced in the last two years was born then in Landsberg."

In the speech of 1936 Hitler said: "The 'Putsch' was the fanatical decision of the young Party to build up a new Germany. That was assuredly in the eyes of many an almost insane decision. Certainly at that time there was not a 51 per cent probability of success on our side, but there was a 99 per cent. probability in favor of our opponents."

"When in 1923 for the first time we determined to act we had already behind us a long history of preparations for a 'Putsch'. I can confess quite calmly that from 1919 to 1923 I thought of nothing else than a *coup d'état*. . . . And although we were defeated, this attempt to turn the destiny of Germany was an absolute necessity, for one could not talk of revolution for four years and then let the decisive day pass without action, as did the 'National Associations'. The Government of that day had come to power through violence and it was through violence that it had to be destroyed.")

In the speech of 1937 Hitler said:

"At that time our opponents intended to raise a revolution about the 12th of November, and a Bavarian revolution at that, and to carry it through under the watchword, 'The Burning out of the Bolshevist North and the temporary separation of Bavaria'. As soon as I heard this, I knew that the hour of Germany's destiny was approaching. Then I formed the resolution to strike four days before our opponents and so to seize for our side the initiative."

"That the attempt failed was perhaps the greatest good fortune of my life and the greatest good fortune for the German nation.... The splitting up of Germany was finally prevented, for in order to get rid of us the help of the North of Germany was needed, and thus separation was stopped. And yet we could not be silenced: as though by an explosion our ideas were hurled over the whole of Germany and thus my decision was justified."

Or as Hitler expressed it in the speech of 1938: "I did not deceive myself! I did not suffer shipwreck. I merely suffered a severe blow, but from this blow the Party and therefore Germany have only emerged the stronger."

The significance of the "Putsch" for Hitler himself he expressed in his speech in 1936:

"It was for me a very hard decision — to take the Bavarian Government prisoner and to declare a national revolution in Germany. For the first time one had to decide on a question of life and death on one's own responsibility with no one to give one orders. And I believe that that, too, was a good thing, for during the last three and a half years I have been forced to make many very difficult decisions in matters where often the destiny of the whole nation was at stake. I have never unfortunately had the famous 51 per cent of security."

"Often one had a 95 per cent. probability of failure and only a 5 per cent. probability of success. But perhaps this 8 November 1923 made it easier for me to make dangerous decisions."

But the Putsch of 1923 had its peculiar significance in the fact that its failure led Hitler to insist on a policy of strict legality in the future struggle of the Party, and he further was led to see the necessity of preparing the way for saving over into the new National Socialist State the existing institutions: this is expressed in Hitler's speech at the commemoration in 1936:

From the failure of the Putsch we drew a great lesson for the future: "We recognized that it is not enough to overthrow the old State, but that the new State must previously have been built up and be practically ready to one's hand And so only a few days after the collapse I formed a new decision: that now without any haste the conditions must be created which would exclude the possibility of a second failure. Later you lived through another revolution — the revolution which took place here in Munich on 9 March 1933 and a day earlier elsewhere in the Reich. But what a difference between the two revolutions! In 1933 it was no longer a question of overthrowing a State by an act of violence: meanwhile the new State had been built up and all that there remained to do was to destroy the last remnants of the old State — and that took but a few hours."

Hitler then recurred to his favorite theme of the rashness of the attempt of 1923: how could they have hoped with their small band to build up the new State while even the few who were with them were quite untrained? "But in 1933 I had behind me by far the greatest organization which Germany ever possessed, a Movement which was built up from the smallest cells until it had become an organization embracing the whole Reich. This mighty reconstruction of the Party contributed to create the most important condition for taking over power in the State and maintaining it securely. And this alone made it possible for us to venture for a second time on revolution — and crowned that venture with success". .

"The experience of the year 1923 produced later the miracle that we could effect a revolution without in the least disturbing domestic order or bringing the life of our people into danger." *Hitler contrasted the violence of the revolution in Spain with the order and discipline of the revolution in Germany.* "We have conquered our State without, I believe, the breaking of a window-pane. That was possible only thanks to thorough preparation and the building up of the Party"....

"And the greatest miracle of all: it is perhaps due solely to the experience of 1923 that we were able to sail round the rock which faces any revolution such as ours, viz. the problem of our relation to the existing so-called 'legal instruments of power' of the State. Previously there were perhaps many who said to themselves: 'Yes, but when the Party has won power in the State, what will it do with the army and the police ? Will it be able at all to bring these

institutions over into the new State?' I have always had the conviction that a new revolution can only be finally successful when it is able not merely to bring with it into the new State these organizations, but also to associate them with the new State for better or for worse. That is certainly a harder task than simply to destroy these instruments as such. It is much harder to effect a revolution and to harness these institutions to the service of the new idea and even to make them stronger than they were before. Perhaps the achievement of which I am personally most proud and which history will one day assuredly value most highly is that I succeeded not only in not breaking up the army but in making of it the *cadre* (*Kader*) for the new army of the German people.... As soldiers we began this struggle; we finished it as politicians. But the wonder of this struggle is that we now could give afresh to the German people its old army. And so, just as formerly the old army fought for the old Reich so, if ever the call should come, will the new army wage war and fight for the new Reich."

"But there is one difference: when the old army took the field it was armed against all weapons save only against the propaganda of disintegration. Today the army carries with it the talisman of political immunity against any attempt at disintegration. Never again will the enemy succeed in disintegrating this army: it is the National Socialist army of the new Reich, and as year by year we send our National Socialist youth into this army it will become ever more closely united with our present-day people and with its spirit.

In each year Hitler in his speech has glorified the martyrs of the Movement. When the bodies of the sixteen martyrs of the "Putsch" had been removed to the Memorial in Munich, Hitler said in his speech of 1935 that long ago he had determined that if ever he came to power he would take these comrades from the cemeteries where they were buried, would do them honor and show them to the nation. "That determination I have now fulfilled. They now pass into the German immortality. In their own time they could not yet see the Reich of today: they could only dimly envisage it. Fate has forbidden to them to experience this Reich. But though they might neither see nor experience this Reich, we will take care that this Reich shall see them. And therefore we have laid them in no crypt and beneath no dome. No, just as once they marched, their breast open to the air, so now shall they lie in wind and weather, in storm and snow, under God's free heaven, a perpetual reminder for the German nation. For us they are not dead: these temples are no crypts: they are an eternal guard-post. Here they stand for Germany and keep guard over our people. Here they lie as true witnesses to our Movement."

In his speech in 1934 Hitler said of the Movement's martyrs:

"But they, too, in the spirit are in our ranks: in the other world they will know that their fight was not in vain. The blood which they shed has become for the Reich the water of baptism.

With this may be compared the speech made at the celebration of the tenth year of the Gau Gross-Berlin when Hitler said: "On this day I think also of all those who are no longer in your midst who had to give their lives in this city as blood-witnesses for the Movement and thus for the resurrection of the German people. In truth they have not fallen in vain! From their blood there has grown up a new Reich, and from it new life will arise a thousand — yes a millionfold."

Hitler's own comment on the "Putsch" made to Mr. G. Ward Price may be quoted:

"I was following Mussolini's example too closely," *the Chancellor told him twelve years after the event.*

"I had meant the Munich Putsch to be the beginning of a 'March on Berlin' which should carry us straight to power. From its failure I learnt the lesson that each country must evolve its own type and methods of national regeneration."